

If ever a fruit tree needs intensive care, it is during those critical hours when the tree is about to be lowered into its new home. The trouble is, roots exposed to a searing sun and drying wind will succumb in no time if left unprotected. Try to prepare the planting hole before the tree is brought home from the nursery. If a delay of several days is impossible to avoid, simply "heel in" the roots by digging a shallow trench and leaning trunk and rootball against the side. Cover the roots with soil.

At its permanent site, dig a hole twice the width and depth of the rootball. As you excavate, put dark topsoil in one pile and lighter color subsoil in another. Mix equal amounts of the topsoil and sphagnum peat moss, then fill the hole halfway. Thoroughly drench with water. After the water has drained, place the tree in the hole, setting it at the same level it grew in the nursery unless otherwise noted.

For balled-and-burlapped trees, loosen the wrap from around the trunk, but do not remove. The wrap can be used to help lower the tree into the hole (later the burlap will decompose gradually). When the tree is in place, fill around rootball with remaining peat moss and soil mixture. Tamp the soil firmly with your foot to make certain no air pockets remain. Water thoroughly. Now check to see if the tree is standing straight. If it is leaning, straighten it. A slight depression around the base of the tree will help catch rainfall and direct it toward the roots. Keep the young tree supplied with moisture.

Most fruit trees are best planted in the spring so the roots become well established before winter. Apple, plum, cherry, and pear can often be planted in late fall, however.

The distance separating trees depends on whether they're dwarf or standard. Generally, dwarfs should be planted at least ten feet apart; standards need as much as 25 feet between.